Opening 'Mainstream' Supervision to Spiritual and Religious Issues

by

Agnes M Hermans

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the mental health disciplines and spirituality and religion has been distant and ambivalent for a number of reasons. In both the literature and in training programmes for professional supervision, little or no attention is given to how to work with religious or spiritual issues. This article explores the resulting marginalisation of spirituality and religion from supervision conversations in mainstream settings and suggests reasons for this; commonalities and differences in the application of supervision of people in Christian roles vs. 'mainstream' roles; and practical steps are offered to supervisors (and indeed to people in other professional roles) on how to open the supervision conversation in 'mainstream' settings to spiritual and religious issues.

In a career that has spanned over twenty-five years in social work and management roles, professional supervision has been an important part of my working life. Initially as a social worker, supervision was an essential part of practice and a requirement for membership of the professional association. Over those years of receiving supervision, I came to value regular, dedicated time to reflect on my work, gain support and integrate theory with practice. I came to so value supervision, that when I moved into management roles, I ensured that the opportunity to receive regular monthly supervision was agreed in my employment contracts.

While I highly valued supervision, I was also aware of its limits in that it didn't offer a place for integrating work with the spiritual dimensions of my life. So when I experienced a work-related crisis, I knew I wanted to be able to reflect on this within the context of my faith experience. As supervision couldn't 'hold' this conversation, I then sought spiritual direction. [1]

These days, professional supervision is one of the services I currently offer as a self-employed person. I provide external supervision on a contract basis to people in roles such as managers of NGO's, community workers, teachers, school principals, project managers, probation officers and nurse leaders. My decision to train in spiritual direction has led me to think about the interface of these two disciplines, i.e. how to work in a practice of 'mainstream' (here reference to 'mainstream' is intended to mean not specifically Christian or religious) supervision that keeps the conversation open to the sacred.

As many spiritual directors are aware, intentionally shifting the focus of the conversation from the psychological or physical world into the spiritual world opens new possibilities that we can never fully fathom. This is not surprising, given the pervasiveness of spirituality according to the findings of the 1968 study of the Religious Experience Unit at Oxford University (Hawker 2000), a 1996 poll by Goldhaber Research Associations (Griffith & Griffith, 2001) and other studies cited in Hawker (2000, p174).

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[1] Spiritual direction as defined by Barry & Connolly (1983) is "help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship."

It is a shame that the supervision conversation does not include dialogue with the supervisee about how their spiritual journey may inform and illuminate the supervision matters being considered. My interest is to discern a way through the forest of professional boundaries, cultural inheritance, the diverse and unique religious and spiritual beliefs practices (and baggage!) that people hold, to journey alongside someone to enable conversations that connect these aspects of people's experience, in a way that they will feel safe, supported, respected and understood in the process.

Focus

My focus here is on supervision, which is the work I do and know well. However supervision is just one example of many diverse professional relationships that are bound by professional standards and codes of practice. My hope is that what I offer here could also apply to other roles such as teaching, health care, coaching, counselling, management etc and that people in those roles can gain some insights and practical suggestions on how to open their professional conversations to the spiritual dimension.

So in this article I will begin by clarifying some terms, and then describe supervision and influences on its development. Then consider some of the commonalities and differences in the applications of supervision of people in Christian roles vs. 'mainstream' roles. Finally I will offer some practical steps on how to open the supervision conversation in 'mainstream' settings to spiritual and religious issues.

Spirituality & religion – a definition of terms

The term *spirituality* is often used interchangeably with *religion,* so I have chosen the following definitions to clarify their meaning.

> *Spirituality is a commitment to choose, as the primary context for understanding and acting, one's relatedness with all that is. With this commitment, one attempts to stay focused on relationships between oneself and other people, the physical environment, one's heritage and traditions, one's body, one's ancestors, saints, Higher Power, or God. It places relationships at the centre of awareness, whether they be interpersonal relationships with the world or other people, or intrapersonal relationships with God or other nonmaterial beings.*
> *(Griffith & Griffith, 2001, p 15-16)*

> *Religion represents a cultural codification of important spiritual metaphors, narratives, beliefs, rituals, social practices, and forms of community among a particular people that provides methods for attaining spirituality, most often expressed in terms of a relationship with the God of that religion. In this sense, God personifies and objectifies the relatedness of spirituality. By working out a relationship with his or her God, a religious person can bring into proper focus other relationships.*
> *(Griffith & Griffith, 2001, p 16)*

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Supervision – what is it?

Supervision is a professional relationship in which two people (supervisor and supervisee), meet intentionally to consider the work of the supervisee. The purpose of supervision is to assist the supervisee to reflect on their work, learn new skills, gain support, and practice according to the standards expected of their profession. Regular supervision is a requirement for a range of professions, including counsellors, social workers, spiritual directors and therapists, and nowadays supervision is increasingly an expected component of professional practice for occupational groups such as nurses, probation officers, ministers, doctors and community workers.

Background to supervision and its relationship to spirituality

Originating in the late 1800s in the work done by charitable organisations, the development of supervision to its present practice has been heavily influenced by psychoanalytic theory (Kadushin & Harkness 2002). A greater awareness of the role of unconscious factors impacting on relationships with clients led to the need for workers to become more self-aware, and this was done in supervision by incorporating the use of techniques utilised in analysis and therapy.

Sigmund Freud was a leading figure in the development of psychoanalysis. His attitude to religion (he contended that belief in God represents a childhood desire for a father figure), long held sway in keeping religion at an intellectual distance from mental health disciplines such as psychiatry and psychology. An inheritance of theological debates (Darwin's theory of evolution, the scientific method, Marx and Engel's contention that religion is the opiate of the masses, and economic rationalism) all contributed to isolating public belief in God from the mainstream.

This distancing of religion resulted in a professional attitude within supervision (and indeed mainstream mental health practice), whereby religion was considered not quite an appropriate topic. Both parties in the supervision relationship do not expect spirituality and religion to be core considerations in the supervisory encounter.

> *"The mental health professions generally have held an ambivalent and distant relationship with spirituality and religion. The reasons for this are multiple and complex.....some feel that psychotherapy is about science and that talk of religion or spirituality can only bring irrational contaminants that might be detrimental. Others feel incompetent, aware of their lack of expertise in theological matters. Still others are concerned about intruding into private areas, offending by their ignorance or difference, or imposing their own religious beliefs upon (their patients)."*
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> *(Griffith & Griffith 2001, p 5-6)*

Religion and spirituality are not robustly covered in training programmes for mainstream mental health professionals, leading to a general inadequacy in terms of skills in this area by professionals and a marginalisation of the subject area. Certainly in the mainstream literature on professional supervision, little or no mention is made of religion or spirituality or attention paid to how to work with religious or spiritual issues.

Professional supervision and the practice of spiritual direction
The practices of spiritual direction and professional supervision have a number of commonalities and some key points of difference:

Commonalities
- Both are intentionally reflective, contemplative, confidential, one-to-one (although both can occur in groups, one-one is the norm), and about growth and development for the supervisee/directee.
- Both focus on the experience of supervisee/directee.

Differences
- The focus in supervision is on the supervisee's work, and their associated learning and support needs. In spiritual direction, the faith/spiritual journey of the directee and the director's role to support them on this is the primary purpose.
- In supervision, religion and spirituality (including the faith practices and beliefs held by the supervisor and supervisee) may be seen as irrelevant or marginal to the conversation, whereas in spiritual direction, they are central concerns.

Supervision of spiritual directors vs. supervision of 'mainstream' roles
There are a number of points of difference between supervision of spiritual directors / Christian counsellors, and 'mainstream' supervision. As can be seen in Table 1 there are two different starting points in each of these situations:

Table 1:   Comparison of Supervision of Christian Workers vs. Supervision of 'Mainstream' Workers

Supervision of Christian counsellors, spiritual directors, ministers, pastoral workers etc	Supervision of 'mainstream' workers e.g. nurses, counsellors, social workers, managers, community workers etc
- Spiritual issues accepted as part of/relevant for supervision	- Spiritual issues may not be considered relevant or appropriate unless connected to cultural considerations
- Usually, both supervisor and supervisee are Christian and both are aware of this	- Spirituality / religious beliefs of each party not necessarily known to other
- Discerning God's action and supervisee's response relevant and important concerns	- Focus of supervision on professional learning, accountability and support for the supervisee
- Discussion about spirituality can be done directly and confidently	- Discussion about spirituality approached indirectly and tentatively (if at all)
- Spiritual expression explicit (e.g. shared prayer, scripture, lectio divina) may be included in session	- Spiritual expression implicit (private prayer, mentally inviting the Holy Spirit to assist or guide session) unless accepted as culturally appropriate (e.g. karakia at the beginning of session with Maori supervisees)
- Models of supervision derived from psychological, theological and pastoral sources	- Models of supervision derived from psychological and secular sources. Some emerging models of supervision from cultural groups (e.g. Maori & Pacific) may incorporate spirituality e.g. *Te Whare Tapa Wha*[2]

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[2] Te Whare Tapa Wha is a holistic health and wellness model developed by Dr Mason Durie in 1982, and it is used extensively by a range of health and social service organisations in NZ. The model is underpinned by four dimensions representing the basic beliefs of life: te taha hinengaro (psychological health), te taha wairua (spiritual health), te taha tinana (physical health) and te taha whanau (family health).

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There are many ways to apply the practice of supervision (e.g. social work supervision, counselling supervision, integration supervision etc), and the professional context within which the supervisee works influences the focus and flavour of the supervision practice as it has developed. For example the understandings and applications of supervision in relation to spirituality can differ considerably as shown in the following three examples:

Supervision of spiritual directors.
Maureen Conroy describes this as a unique ministry 'because it contains a contemplative component and focuses on discerning interior movements' (1995, p. xviii). She elaborates as follows:

> *'The purposes of supervision are rooted in the spiritual director's experience of interior movements while in the process of directing. The overall goal of supervision is to help spiritual directors to grow in self-awareness and interior freedom in order to stay with directees' experiences and to be attentive to God during direction sessions.' (1995, p9).*

Integration supervision
Integration supervision is a supervision approach that specifically attempts to integrate the fields of clinical practice with theology and biblical studies (Tan, 2009). This approach can be used when both supervisor and supervisee have Christian faith.

Spirituality of supervision
Within the literature on 'mainstream' supervision, Michael Carroll (2003) has written about the 'spirituality of supervision' and he distinguishes between functional supervision i.e. supervision as a set of techniques, and the philosophy of supervision, where supervision is an extension of self. Carroll considers that it is in the latter that the spirituality of supervision is found and this 'way of being in the supervisory life' can include the following: being reflective, learning, becoming process oriented, establishing healthy relationships, learning connectedness, and becoming an interior person.

Extending the supervision conversation to spiritual direction
Rather than fitting neatly into any of the above three applications of supervision, my interest is in *supervision-when-spiritual-issues-arise* and how the skills of spiritual direction can be usefully employed when providing supervision to a variety of mainstream professionals.   I am currently applying this in my professional work, however this is an emerging dimension of my supervision practice, and the following are offered as working suggestions to open the conversation.
As shown in Table One, in supervising mainstream professionals, the starting point is that not only is there no expectation by the supervisee that religion or spirituality will be relevant or central concerns, furthermore, the supervisee may consider it is not appropriate to bring up spiritual issues.

However as the conversation unfolds and by being attuned to the spiritual issues, the supervisor can choose to open up, or extend the conversation into an exploration of the spiritual issues, while respecting the safety, comfort and sensitivities of the supervisee and still maintain the overarching focus on supervision as a work-focused reflective practice.

So here I am suggesting a model of supervision that can sometimes integrate spiritual direction if the supervisee chooses, and that retains an emphasis on work related learning, accountability and support. In this practice, the focus of the supervisory relationship is to

a) facilitate reflection on the supervisee's professional work
b) be open to extending the conversation when spiritual issues arise within a relationship of equals, and doing so in a way that respects the supervisee's safety and sensitivity as well as the philosophy and boundaries of the supervision relationship
c) be capable of offering a blend of supervision and spiritual direction if the supervisee wishes

How to 'open the door' to the spiritual conversation – some practical considerations
So what are some of the approaches professional supervisors can take, in order to 'open to the sacred' with their supervisees? Sometimes the hardest part is how to start the conversation, what to say, what questions to ask, and how to frame the conversation.

1. Attitude of the supervisor – respect, wonder, curiosity
Fundamental to opening the conversation to the sacred, it is necessary for the supervisor to:

- Respect the personhood of the supervisee which creates the space for openness about spiritual or religious experience
- Cultivate an attitude of wonder and withhold attitudes of certainty and cynicism
- Cultivate a climate of openness and respect by being equals in the supervision relationship

Opening the door to spiritual conversation is a way of honouring what is important to the supervisee. It is also about how the supervisor can tap into whatever spiritual resources a person may have or bring, even when the supervisor does not understand or share that spiritual tradition.

> *'How can a clinician open therapy to spiritual and religious resources that a person might bring if the therapist shares no common tradition of religious beliefs or practices with the person? Our best clinical outcomes have occurred when we have been able to stay in the position of an anthropologist meeting another person from an unknown culture.....The skills most helpful for opening therapy to the spiritual and religious domains have been those for preparing our own selves to meet someone not yet known – the fostering within ourselves of curiosity, wonder and openness to the being of the other.*
> *(Griffith & Griffith, 2001, pp 26-27)*

For example, if a supervisee expresses some words or phrases that are associated with the religious or spiritual domain, e.g. 'everything happens for a reason,' 'it's all part of the divine plan,' 'it's in God's hands now' one can open up the conversation by questions of wonder, and curiosity, e.g. "In God's hands – what is that like for you? Is it a relief, or is it more like God is now in control of things? Do you feel you still have a part to play in this?"

2. Permission

When we want people to share a bit more deeply than usual, or we enquire into areas of their life they rarely talk about, an explicit request for permission can make a significant difference in enabling them to lower their defences and open up. Finding a way to include this question that suits ones natural conversational style may take some experimentation, but a couple of suggestions are: "I get a sense you have more to say about that, could I ask you a bit more about that?" "I'd like to understand your thinking about this a little more, can we spend some time exploring this with you?" David Rock (2006) explores this notion of seeking permission, an important consideration given the personal and marginalised nature of this subject within mainstream supervision. Requesting permission also serves to underline the power supervisees have to choose not to answer questions put to them.

3. A note about language

Regarding the issue of conversations about spirituality, Paul Hawker has this word of caution:

> When it comes to soul affairs, there is an almost impassable cultural barrier between two sets of people: those who speak a religious language and those who don't. Herein lies another layer of reason why our soul affairs remain secret. Although popular, privatized religion and public institutionalized religion may well describe similar things, neither side understands the other, nor do they accept that this state of affairs exists. (Hawker, 2000, p 168)

A way to avoid the risk of 'talking past each other' as Hawker describes, is to carefully *listen to the precise wording the supervisee uses* to describe their spirituality and simply use the same words to reflect back or frame into a question that invites further exploration and sharing. Using the directee's same words, avoids the risk of changing the meaning intended by the directee, and it honours their experience as well as accurately reflecting their experience back to them.

4. What information do you have about the supervisee?

Consider what information you already have about the supervisee or the organisation they work for e.g.

- whether they work in a church-based organisation
- do they belong to a cultural group known to be religious (e.g. Filipino) or spiritual (e.g. Maori)
- does their organisation have a commitment to cultural models or professional practice frameworks that include spiritual dimensions, e.g. *Te Whare Tapa Wha*

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- have they undertaken any professional development that incorporates spirituality (e.g. self-care and resilience training often draws on holistic models of wellness; Stephen Covey's The *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is often used in organisational development. *Habit 7: Sharpen the Saw* is particularly relevant to the spiritual dimension).

5. Listening for references to spirituality and religion

Opening the conversation to talk about spirituality or religion can occur by careful listening to what people spontaneously speak about when they feel safe and respected. One needs to be attuned to this as it can be presented in a wide range of forms, depending on the individual's unique spirituality and experiential world. Griffith (2010) describes some of these forms as:

- Idioms – e.g. 'Praise God' 'he's in a better place now' (i.e. heaven), 'in a previous life I must have been a...'
- Metaphors of God or spirituality - e.g. God as an old man in the sky; the experience of God in nature
- Stories shared from their own lives - e.g. about their religious background/ experiences
- Prayers – e.g. karakia
- Spiritual practices – e.g. yoga, fasting, church attendance, meditation
- Rituals – e.g. solstice, first communion etc
- Festivals and festive seasons – e.g. Christmas, Diwali
- Spiritual community (which can consist of both human and nonmaterial beings) e.g. faith community, church, angels, ancestors, saints

6. Use of existential questions

When there have been no comments related to spirituality by the supervisee to springboard from, a safe way to start is by asking how the person has responded to past challenges or crises in their lives. These types of questions are called existential questions, and because they are about struggles and sorrows that all people eventually must face, they are a safe and reliable path for learning about personal spirituality. No previous knowledge of the person's religious tradition is necessary. Existential questions open up disclosure about the person's religious or spiritual life if it has meaning for them; however the timing of asking these questions is crucial – the person has to feel that you understand and are genuinely interested before they risk self-disclosure.

Examples of such questions include:
> *What sustained you / gave you hope when x happened?*
> *Who truly understands your situation?*
> *What are you most grateful for in your life?*
> *Where do you find peace?*
> *When you feel confused and uncertain, how do you go about making sense of life?*
> *When did you last feel hopeful? What was that like?*
> *When times are hard, what keeps hope alive?*

Who knows what you are going through? To whom do you turn when you need help?

How do you manage to still feel appreciation for the good things in the midst of so much disappointment?

(If someone mentions they have been praying)

What words have you prayed?

How do you sense that God received your prayer?

What does God know about your situation that others may not know?

If God were to look at this situation what would God see?

What do you experience as real about God, religion and spirituality?

Is spirituality or religion an important part of your life?

Are there important beliefs you have, that relate to this area of your life/work?

7. Use of resources to open up the spiritual conversation

Resources such as *Signpost*[3] and *Symbols*[4] cards which use simple words, pictures and symbols to represent a range of everyday things, can be utilised in sessions to build conversations about the spiritual dimensions of work. These tools are inclusive and not based on any particular theology, doctrine or philosophy, so they can be a good way to open the conversation when much about the supervisee and their spirituality is not known. Leveraging off the spiritual dimension of holistic models such as *Te Whare Tapa Wha* or promoting self-care and workplace resilience can also help to introduce and frame this conversation.

8. Other issues to consider

There is insufficient space here to explore the following, however these are some other issues to consider in relation to this topic:

- Self-scrutiny about one's own capability to 'hold' the spiritual conversation, particularly if the supervisee's spiritual beliefs or practices differ from one's own.
- Some evaluation of where one's faith development sits, e.g. Fowler's (1981) stages of faith and openness to expressions of religion and spirituality different from one's own.
- Supervisees may identify somewhere along the following continuum: no faith or spiritual practice / spiritual but not Christian / nominal or committed Christian. Think about how you would engage with, or respond to people in each of these situations. How can you build your competence in all these areas?
- How one can get supervision for ourselves that can include this aspect of our practice.
- Discerning the use of explicit reference to spirituality in one's supervision practice, e.g. in promotional material, during the introductory session, supervision contract etc.

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[3] Signpost – Everyday Spirituality cards available from www.innovativeresources.org

[4] Symbols cards available from www.peoplemaking.com.au

- Discerning and discussing the balance of implicit (internal prayer, silence) vs. explicit references (spiritual reading/prayer, lectio divina[5] etc) as the supervision relationship potentially develops into a blended supervision/spiritual direction relationship
- Considering the possibility of religious beliefs or experiences that potentially undermine a supervisee's personal or vocational health – for example when religious beliefs shut down personal reflection and silence dialogue. How would one work when a supervisee presents these issues? In his book, Griffith (2010) explores the issue of religions being misused in ways that harm and strategies of working with this.

Conclusion

This article has explored the interface of supervision and spiritual direction and discussed the extension of the supervision conversation to include spiritual issues. Consideration has been given to the marginalisation of spirituality from mainstream practice in this area, and some practical strategies have been offered to open the conversation to the religious or spiritual dimension.

A.M Hermans

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[5] Lectio divina (*divine reading*) is an ancient Christian practice of scriptural reading, meditation and prayer intended to promote communion with God and to increase the knowledge of God's Word. Lectio Divina has 4 steps which are read, meditate, pray and contemplate.

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